

Joseph and Egyptian Nationalism

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Parshat Miketz

Parshat Miketz: The Birth of Nationalism by David Sedley

<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/parshat-miketz-the-birth-of-nationalism/>

Joseph revolutionized ancient Egyptian society by introducing patriotism and nationalism to the people. After two years in jail, Joseph was brought to the palace to interpret Pharaoh's dreams of seven thin cows devouring seven fat cows and seven lean stalks of grain consuming seven fat stalks. Joseph told Pharaoh the dreams foretold seven years of plenty which would be followed by seven years of famine. But Joseph went further. He told Pharaoh that the only way to prepare for the famine was to create a national identity that would cause people to give up everything they own for the greater good of the country.

And now let Pharaoh look for a wise and clever man, and place him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint overseers over the land, and divide the land of Egypt into five parts during the seven years of plenty. And let them gather all the food of the coming good years, and store the grain under the hand of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and guard it. And the food shall be a security for the land in the seven years of famine, which shall be in the land of Egypt; so that the land is not destroyed through the famine. (Genesis 41:33-36)

Joseph stressed that the goal was not only to save the lives of the people, but as "a security for the land" so that "the land is not destroyed through the famine."

Pharaoh appointed Joseph as his second-in-command and gave him free rein to implement his plan. So successful was Joseph that by the time the famine arrived, the people were prepared to give up everything they owned in order to save the country itself. They came before Joseph and said:

Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Acquire us and our land for bread, and we and our land will be slaves to Pharaoh; and give us seed, that we may live, and not die, and that the land does not become desolate. (Genesis 47:19)

The people of Egypt gave up everything they had including their freedom for the sake of saving their lives and so that "the land does not become desolate." Joseph accomplished this transformation of the nation by spending his years in office going throughout the land wearing the fine clothing that Pharaoh gave him, encouraging all the people to be patriotic....

Joseph was a hero to the Egyptians, and rightly so. He prevented a national disaster on an unimaginable scale. And he did this through creating a national identity around the cult of his personality and introducing patriotism to the extent that the Egyptians were prepared to forego their own personal needs to do what was best for the country.

I wonder, though, whether the nationalism and patriotism that Joseph instilled within the nation, were also ultimately what led to the enslavement of the Jews by the Egyptians led by another Pharaoh a few years later. The slavery in Egypt began when Pharaoh was worried that Israelites, as foreigners, would seize control of the land.

Let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when a war happens against us, they also join themselves with our enemies, and fight against us, and leave the land. (Exodus 1:10)

As Rashi explains there, Pharaoh's fear was not actually that the Israelites would leave, but that they would gain too much control over the land of Egypt, and eventually force the Egyptians themselves to go into exile. Nationalism is a powerful tool. It saved the Egyptians of Pharaoh's time and in the modern era brought the enlightenment to Egypt. But it is a two-sided coin and can also lead to xenophobia, irrational fear of those from other countries and demonization of any citizens who are not viewed as the "true" citizens of the country.

Yosef, Big Government and Fight Club: A Hegelian Dialectic by Jordan Reimer

To quote Jeremy England, in a response to a Times of Israel piece, the text emphasizes that the "central planning of the kind undertaken by Yosef and Pharaoh ultimately leads down a Hayekian "road to serfdom." Here, what starts as a grain shortage brought on by natural cycles...is leveraged by a government with authoritarian ambitions to utterly enslave the people – better yet, to have the people beg the government to enslave them! This much is clear: the more coercive power of the state is deployed in the name of preventing individuals from making bad decisions about how to arrange their own sustenance, the greater will be the eventual loss of individual liberty." "The Story of Yosef is no guidebook for managing the economy, but rather a sophisticated and somber warning of how free people choose to become slaves."